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THE RELATION OF DRAMA TO LITERATURE

BY DONALD CLIVE STUART

SOMETIMES in journalistic criticism one reads that a certain play has a "real literary value." The phrase causes surprise and the reader immediately wonders whether the play will succeed. He is inclined to bestow silent praise upon the manager for undertaking the dangerous attempt to present a drama of so-called literary value to the modern public; and a few weeks later, when the play is taken off, he indulges in a threnody or a philippic in regard to the decline of dramatic taste, or he may content himself with a satisfied "I told you so!"

The opinion seems to prevail that a play no longer succeeds because of its literary value, but in spite of it. If a manager suspects that a play sacrifices one iota of the action to literary or poetic beauty, he will hardly take the trouble to read it; and he doubts the success of any play which attempts to reach the audience mostly through the lines. Of course, one can assume—and many people do assume—that the modern manager is a creature endowed with the sole faculty of making money. One can indulge in futile, high-browed talk about the degeneration of the drama. One can put the blame on that precious and long-suffering scapegoat called the public—that vague, intangible mass of bad taste which the individual makes the cause of all that is wrong and of which the individual never considers himself a part. There are many ways for the modern literary Pharisee to look down upon those who believe that modern drama is a legitimate form of art. Yet in what relation does dramatic art stand to literature? In a classification of the arts ought modern drama to stand as a sub-head under literature, or ought it to stand as an independent head? Ought it to be judged by literary criteria? Few

will be so daring as to claim that modern drama as a whole belongs to that field of art designated as literature. That there may be certain exceptions to this rule does not enter into the question. We are dealing with drama as a whole, not with individual plays. Are most modern plays to be held as almost worthless for the reason that, if judged by the usual canons of literary criticism, they show little if any merit?

If such a problem is propounded, the question naturally arises as to what is meant by the terms literature and drama; and the impossibility of giving satisfactory definitions of those terms must be admitted at the outset. Yet it may be assumed that all people use the word literature in about the same sense; and if it is said that *Hamlet* has both a literary and dramatic value, while Pinero's plays lack literary value, every one will understand what is meant, although every one may not admit the truth of the statement. In regard to the definition of drama, it may also be assumed that ideas are held in common by those who know anything of dramatic art, although it may be necessary to point out that drama exists only while it is being performed. Indications of dialogue and action in written or printed words are no more a play than the architect's plans are a building. Drama in book form is only potential drama. A printed play is to drama what the score is to the opera.

There are two ways in which drama reaches the audience: by speaking to the ear and by speaking to the eye—to use a phrase borrowed from Aristotle. The result is that there are practically two kinds of drama, according to the method employed to represent the story. There is that kind which, in spite of the pleonasm, may be called the drama of action, in contradistinction to the drama of literature. By the latter is meant the drama which gets over the footlights and interests the audience by the strength and beauty of its lines. On the other hand, the drama of action, while it uses dialogue, speaks more to the eye than to the ear in its most dramatic moments and uses action and stage pictures to get the story over the footlights. Most modern drama is of this kind, and whether one approves or not, modern plays are therefore almost devoid of literary interest.

This procedure is by no means entirely a modern development. Aristotle advocated speaking to the eye, and Horace goes a step farther when he says:

“What we hear

With weaker passion will affect the heart,
Than when the faithful eye beholds the part.”

Yet the very fact that Horace and Aristotle warned dramatists not to speak to the ear alone, is evidence that, from the beginning, authors of plays have been in danger of forgetting that they must be dramatists primarily—not poets or novelists. It can almost be said that there has been a conflict in drama between action and literary value, and a survey of the history of dramatic art will show sometimes the former and sometimes the latter element prevailing.

In regard to Greek drama, it is difficult to visualize a performance so as to be able to decide how much of the interest was aroused by the lines and how much by the action. The theater and the audience were enormous in comparison with those of the present day; and yet the acoustics were so marvelous that probably all the spectators could hear. The audience could easily follow the story because it was not only familiar with the plot, but also the drama was dear to the heart of the spectator, for it was a part of his religion. Yet under these ideal conditions, how many in this tremendous audience, made up of people from all walks of life, appreciated to any great extent the poetic beauty and strength of the lines, and how many were interested mostly by the mimetic portrayal of the story? How many in that audience caught the full power of the choral odes? Some of them did, no doubt. But did the majority, did the groundlings—to use an anachronism—admire them as do modern classical scholars? In other words, how far did the lines make Greek tragedy a success?

The same question might well be asked in regard to the plays of Shakespeare. If the majority of the Athenian audience caught the full poetic and literary beauty of the lines, it was beyond a doubt the most wonderful audience that ever existed; and one is repeatedly assured by Greek scholars that such was the case. Historians have also held that the Elizabethan audience was of a mental caliber superior to that of our modern audiences; but it is difficult to believe that theatrical audiences have so degenerated, although it is always the fashion for each generation to bemoan the decadence of drama.

A well-known student of Greek drama said that it took him months to read a Greek play, and complete understand-

ing of it came only after years of study. Making all due allowance for the fact that this scholar is not an ancient Greek, his statement is strong evidence that Greek plays contained literary beauties which never reached the audience. One has no right to demand that a spectator study the lines of a play before or after the performance. The appeal must be not only direct and instantaneous, but it must contain an element of surprise. One must not know what is going to happen lest one might lose the full effect of that painful pleasure of dramatic suspense. One must not anticipate one line or action. That is incontestibly the rule of the drama of action and therein lies the power of dramatic art. When a drama is so written as to demand study in book form, one may feel reasonably sure that the spectator catches the appeal of the action and misses much of the literary value. That is probably what happened to the Athenian in the theater and there lies the weakness of such drama.

In the Middle Ages is found a pure drama of action unhampered by literary traditions. It is drama in a primitive form and hence speaks to the eyes. The plays are full of action. Stage directions occur in the earliest plays which have come down to us, and sometimes they occupy more of the page than the lines themselves. This leaves no doubt as to the importance placed upon the action. The *Miracles de Notre Dame*—the most dramatic plays of the Middle Ages—are filled with action, and their appeal must have been to the eyes more than to the ears. The outdoor theater had made that necessary. No one will deny that the mystery plays, with their careful and elaborate scenery, their shockingly real realism, were arousing interest as drama of action. Their literary value is very low even in comparison with the contemporary forms of literature; but, like the Passion Play at Oberammergau, they held the attention, not by their lines, but by the action.

It is the men of the Renaissance who begin to impose literary standards upon the drama. The French dramatists of the second half of the sixteenth century thought they were building plays according to the precepts of Horace and Aristotle; but in reality it was the pernicious, undramatic influence of Seneca which was being brought to bear on them, with the result that they produced, not living dramas, but very cold, lifeless elegies in five acts. These so-called

dramatists had just enough influence, together with the influence of social conditions, to bring drama under the domination of literature. All action, which had been before the eyes of the spectator, is banished from the stage when the rules of classicism are accepted. The messenger takes the place of the action, and the audience is merely told what is happening. The appeal is made no longer through the eyes, but through the ears. The lines become all-important, and in spite of their charm and power one often feels—as Hugo so aptly expressed it—that the most interesting part of the play is going on behind the scenes.

As soon as this literary drama was established, the question arose as to the relative value of words and action; and perhaps the earliest statement of it was made by d'Aubignac in 1657. A seventeenth-century English translation of the passage from his *Pratique du théâtre* reads as follows:

“For there is no small difficulty to judge of the success of a play by the reading of it alone; for very often those plays which read worst are the best when they come to be represented; and on the contrary, likewise, those which seem admirable to the reader are often very defective on the stage, and the reason of this is the difference between conceiving an action as you read and seeing the same thing represented to your eyes. Things fine to say are not always so to see; and the pleasure of reading makes some things agreeable which the vehemency of action makes otherwise; as likewise some that appear weak in reading are strengthened by action.”

D'Aubignac does not state the question completely; but he points out, at a remarkably early date, the fact that we have no right to judge and even cannot judge a play by reading it alone. Yet this lesson has yet to be learned by a large class of critics who still insist upon writing dramatic criticism from a literary view-point.

The English critic, Rymer, in 1693, makes a decided advance in the theory that lines are sometimes to be sacrificed to action when he says, in his *Short View of Tragedy*, in regard to Shakespeare: “Many, peradventure, of the tragical scenes in Shakespeare, cry'd up for the action, might do yet better without words. Words are a sort of heavy baggage that were better out of the way at the push of action, especially in his bombast circumstance, where the words and action are seldom akin, generally are inconsistent, at cross purposes, embarrass, or destroy each other.” Asking why the famous scene between Othello and Iago

has raised *Othello* above all other tragedies, he says that it is purely on account of the action and that such scenes as this "have made all the world run after Harlequin and Scaramuccio." In other words, such scenes have brought forth modern drama in its present form in which pantomime plays such an important part.

Returning to France, we find Voltaire advocating more action in order to try to save the moribund classical literary tragedy of the eighteenth century. He used the significant phrase "the great art of silence." He called attention to the possibility of representing certain feelings by one word, by an attitude, by a cry escaping at one's grief, by a silence. All that is very modern. Yet he never went so far as to allow the element of action to infringe upon the lines, which is by no means a modern attitude toward drama; and in protecting the literary element at the expense of the action he was trying to break down the very foundations of modern drama. He is explicit and unswerving in his view-point and even bemoans the fact that he has hastened the decadence of literary tragedy by introducing action, for, he says, "A monologue written by Racine is superior to all theatrical actions." Those who have a poetical or literary turn of mind will agree with Voltaire, but the modern dramatist will certainly not let that statement go unquestioned. For example, at the beginning of the second act of Racine's *Britannicus* Nero describes how Junie was abducted and brought to his palace at his command. A helpless woman, surrounded by brutal soldiers, she subdued the brutal emperor by her timid innocence, and with her eyes glistening with tears, in the light of the flickering torches she passed unharmed from his presence. The harmonious Alexandrine lines, such expressions as "I loved even her tears which I had caused to flow" long remain in one's memory. Yet in a modern play this poetry would have been turned into stage directions, and, instead of being described at the beginning of the second act, the scene would have been acted at the end of the first act, possibly without one word being spoken. Who will claim that the modern play would be weaker if thus constructed? Is the modern audience to be criticized because it wishes to see the action instead of hearing it described, even though that description is written by Racine?

Such questions, although they constantly recur, were an-

swered by Diderot even in Voltaire's lifetime when he set forth the theory that dialogue and poetic or literary beauty must be sacrificed to action. Diderot believed firmly that acting is a vital part of the drama and that the success and even the merit of a play depend upon the manner in which it is put upon the stage. He carried his theory so far as "to close his ears to listen to a play"; and if the play got over the footlights to him without the aid of dialogue he put his stamp of approval on it. One can easily imagine the pleasure he would have taken in a moving-picture show. In his letter to Voltaire describing the stirring acting of Mlle. Clairon in *Tancrède*, when for the first time on the classical French stage an actress wore flowing robes, instead of a hoopskirt, and allowed her hair to become disheveled, he tells how she aroused him to the highest pitch of enthusiasm by her silent acting, and he adds, significantly: "Silence and pantomime have sometimes a pathos that all the resources of speech can never approach." He insisted upon the powerful effect of exact scenery and the artistic grouping of actors, and he pointed out that there are whole scenes in which it is infinitely more natural for characters to move than to speak.

Such a theory does not logically reduce drama to pantomime, nor does it claim that the best drama is pantomime; but it simply means that when silence is more dramatic speeches must not spoil it, although they may be as fine as Hamlet's soliloquy. If Voltaire heard such heresy, he would say once more with his smile that withers, "It is easier to put assassinations on the stage than to write fine lines." Yet it is not easy to indicate action which will vividly and powerfully tell the story. It is always the temptation of the dramatist to explain everything by lines, to talk through his characters, to let his poetic muse soar as high as possible. It takes much self-control for a dramatist to impose silence when the action demands it, or to write one sentence or one word instead of a long speech. The modern audience does not want explanation of what it sees. It prefers to draw its own conclusions and to make its own commentaries. Like one listening to music, it prefers emotion to clearly defined thought.

The Romantic drama of the early nineteenth century in France is a combination of the drama of literature and the drama of action. Victor Hugo brought the action from

behind the scenes and placed it on the stage in full view of the audience. His dialogue was in verse because he was a poet at heart and because he did not wish to have this new kind of a play classed with the contemporary cheap prose melodrama. Yet Hugo was vigorously opposed because he insisted upon a concrete, more commonplace vocabulary in place of the abstract, poetic vocabulary of the classical drama. That the classicists' conception of poetry may have been wrong does not enter into the question. They were fighting for a principle—for literary drama against drama of action.

The play *Hernani*, about which the storm and battle raged, contains excellent examples of these two kinds of drama. In the fourth act when Don Carlos is standing before the tomb of Charlemagne he bursts forth in a poetical speech analyzing his emotions. It is a long monologue, but it is dramatic poetry far above the ordinary. The action of the play is at a standstill, and practically the whole speech could be cut without harming the action in any respect. On the other hand, the moment of intense dramatic surprise, suspense, and interest is caused, not by a speech, but by the far-away sound of a hunting-horn which brings the message that young Hernani must commit suicide at that very moment—on his wedding night. When this play is produced at the Comédie Française there is always a burst of warm applause at the end of the monologue of Don Carlos, while at the sound of the horn a movement of emotion and an indistinct murmur sweep over the whole theater. There is no doubt as to which scene is the more powerful, the more enjoyed by the audience. It is quite possible that in the latter scene Hugo might have written a wonderful passage, full of poetry and keen psychology, describing the sound of the horn and its meaning to Hernani and his bride; but Hugo was too much of a dramatist to make this mistake. While we may have lost a strong piece of literature, we have kept a powerful dramatic moment. The real lover of drama has no regrets, and even the most sophisticated will hardly call this a cheap theatrical trick.

Thus dramatists learned to depend upon the action and to speak to the eye primarily, not to the ear. It ceased to be necessary for the builders of plays to have either poetic or literary talent when it was realized that actions speak louder than words. The climax of the drama, the so-called

“big scene” became one of true dramatic interest in which the lines play a secondary part. The “situation” was presented by action and literary interest was sacrificed. Once again the lesson has been learned that drama is inherently action.

Another force has been at work making it impossible for modern drama to enter into that category of art expressed by the nebulous term literature. It is the realistic movement in art. In a modified way all art is an exaggeration or an intensifying of contemporary reality, but drama aims to reproduce the idea of reality more faithfully than any other form of art. If one wishes to know the subject and spirit of the plays of any generation, he has only to discover what that generation considered *real* in its society and life. Thus the drama of the seventeenth century in France was distinctly poetical and literary; and with its long monologues, psychological discussions, and its over-refinement it corresponded to the social conditions and to the contemporary conception of reality. The audience was made up of people who indulged in similar poetical verbiage and long psychological discussions in the *salons*. Racine’s plays, for that reason, seemed perfectly real to the audience; and because our manners and our conception of reality have changed, such drama seems distinctly unreal to us and is impossible at the present time. The early nineteenth century was imaginative, lyric, poetical. It was the age of young dreamers. Hernani, René, and Werther are unreal to our cold, practical generation. Their poetic phraseology would seem unnatural to the modern audience. It did not sound strange to the Elizabethan audience to hear a man say to the woman he loved, as he took leave of her:

“It was the lark, the herald of the morn,
No nightingale: look, love, what envious streaks
Do lace the severing clouds in yonder east,
Night’s candles are burnt out, and jocund day
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain-top.”

If a modern dramatist could put such lines in a modern play the audience would hardly understand them. It is very difficult to imagine an actor giving such a speech when representing a man in a sack suit about to climb down the fire-escape of a New York flat. In an age of realism, the most real of all arts cannot contain dialogue much above the conversation of every-day life.

It is true, however, that a drama whose scene is laid far away either in space or time may contain a more poetical and literary element. The glamour of distance allows Romeo to speak in the soft cadence of verse; but Pinero's heroes must be unpoetically real. Yet the place of poetic drama has been almost entirely usurped by modern opera. In this form of art also there is a change taking place parallel to the change of the drama of literature into the drama of action. Music is no longer allowed to interfere with the action in opera, just as words are no longer allowed to interfere with the action in drama. The aria no longer holds back the climax. A comparison of *Tristan und Isolde* with *Pelléas et Mélisande* shows in a remarkable way how the musical element is subordinated to the action in the newer opera. Indeed, the development of opera is so strikingly parallel to the development of drama that the one seems to justify the other.

In modern opera, with the possible exception of Wagner—who is no longer very modern—there are practically no passages worthy of orchestral rendition alone. If the scenery, the lines, the action, are taken away, and if left to depend on music alone, modern opera falls to the ground. So in modern drama there are few passages worth reading or worthy of being published or which will find a place in future anthologies of literature. Very often the remark is made that opera is a low form of music; and it might be said that drama is a low form of literature. Ought one to continue invidious comparisons and say that scene-painting and construction are a low form of plastic art? Much is out of proportion and must be out of proportion in order to produce the right effect. The scene-builder deliberately violates the rules of plastic art in order not to produce an absurd picture. Therefore one has no right to judge his work by the common criteria of painting and architecture. It makes no difference whether scene-painting is a high or low form of art, provided it serves its purpose. Thus it makes no difference whether opera is a high or low form of music, provided it serves its purpose of representing dramatic action with a musical accompaniment.

It is possible that we are applying the wrong standards of criticism to opera in subjecting it to purely musical standards; and in the classification of the arts it may well stand as a sub-head under **drama** and hence it should be

judged by slightly modified dramatic standards. To say that opera is a low form of music is as pointless as saying that a derby hat is a low form of architectural art. It is just as pointless to say that drama is a low form of literature. A play may or may not have a literary value without affecting its value as a drama. If it has a literary value without harming the construction, the play has an added charm; but it does not follow that a play should be criticized for being without a literary element, any more than it should be criticized for being without a musical accompaniment. One has no right to pass final judgment on drama from literary standards; and in all justice modern drama cannot stand in a classification of the arts as a sub-head under literature, but must stand alone as an independent head.

It seems very obvious to say that drama should be judged by standards of dramatic criticism alone; but the trouble is that the theory is not put in practice, and future generations may criticize our drama as we criticize the drama of the past—in book form and almost entirely from a literary view-point. In this way the future critic may do gross injustice to many good plays of the present, as we do injustice to many plays of the past which are now noted merely in foot-notes of histories of literature because they are not “literature,” although they contain well-handled dramatic situations. It is easy to imagine the future literary historian of dramatic art passing by the scene in Pinero’s *Iris*, in which the nervous fingers of a woman dropping a check-book into a valise dramatically portray in silence her moral ruin; and we can hear the future critic quoting Chantecler’s *Ode to the Sun* as a fine bit of drama when, as a matter of fact, it is lyric poetry. The literary critic, who is so modest in regard to his views on painting and music, rarely hesitates to discuss drama. In most colleges the study of the drama is included in courses on literature, conducted by men who have little taste for the theater and who solemnly expound the beauties and faults of plays they never saw acted. It is not at all strange, under such conditions, that very few even of the educated class realize that drama is an art by itself; and that instead of being a simple, obvious form of art, it is one which requires the delicate touch of many skilful, understanding hands before it can fulfil its lofty purpose.

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